

Short Communication

Distribution of the Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* Gray in Kerala, South India

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The Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* Gray, is one of the 23 species of terns that occur in the Indian subcontinent (Ali & Ripley 1983). It is a medium-sized tern, with a deeply forked tail and an orange bill in all seasons. The adult breeding birds have a grey upper breast and chin, and black crown, belly and tail coverts. The white tail has long outer feathers, and the wings are grayish white. Adult non-breeding and immature birds have white under parts with a variable amount of black speckles and a streaked black crown. The Black-bellied Tern is smaller and slimmer than the River Tern, *Sterna aurantia* Gray. It has been categorized as Near Threatened (NT) by IUCN (2010) because of its restricted distribution, low world population (about 10,000 individuals), loss of potential breeding sites, collection of eggs for food and overfishing. In recent years, the breeding population of the Black bellied Tern in Chitwan National Park in Nepal has completely disappeared because of over-harvesting of wetland products (BirdLife International 2008). Hence it is important to understand and monitor the population of these terns in densely populated landscapes such as those found in Kerala. This note seeks to document the distribution of the Black-bellied Tern in the northwestern portion of Kerala and to summarise other available records in Tamil Nadu and Kerala states.

Knowledge of the population status and distribution of this bird in south India is based mainly on field observations, many of which are taken from unpublished reports (Fig. 1).

Neelakandan observed this species on the banks of the Gayathri River in Palghat District and Gaston later observed it from the Cheruthurthy in Thrissur District (Ravindran 1992). In 1992, Ravindran reported the tern in marshland surrounded by paddy fields on the banks of the River Bharadhapuzha in Palghat District. Neelakantan (1993) also reported the species from Kole wetland (a Ramsar site) in Thrissur District. Susanthkumar (2004) has subsequently reported several sightings of this bird from the banks of the River Bharathapuzha, e.g. at Kuttippuram–Mallurkadavu, Kuttippuram–Kangapuzhakadavu, Chembikkal, Rangatoor–Thazethara, Thirunavaya, Perassanoor, Chamravattam and Purathur. The only known breeding site of the species in Kerala was reported from the Kuttippuram-Mallurkadavu region (Sushanthkumar 2004). The species was also reported from the Wayanad Wildlife Sanctuary (Islam & Rahmani 2004). More recently, Jaffer Palot has reported the species from the Parambikulam Wildlife Sanctuary. According to the IBA report (Islam & Rahmani 2004), the only reports of the species in Tamil Nadu have come from the Vedanthangal Bird Sanctuary.

As the tern had previously been reported at Mallurkadav in Malappuram District (Sushanthkumar 2004), twelve visits were made to this site between December 2006 and March 2007, while other locations were visited only once. On the twelfth visit to Mallurkadav, on 7 March 2007, two individuals were observed on the banks of the River Bharathapuzha. Single

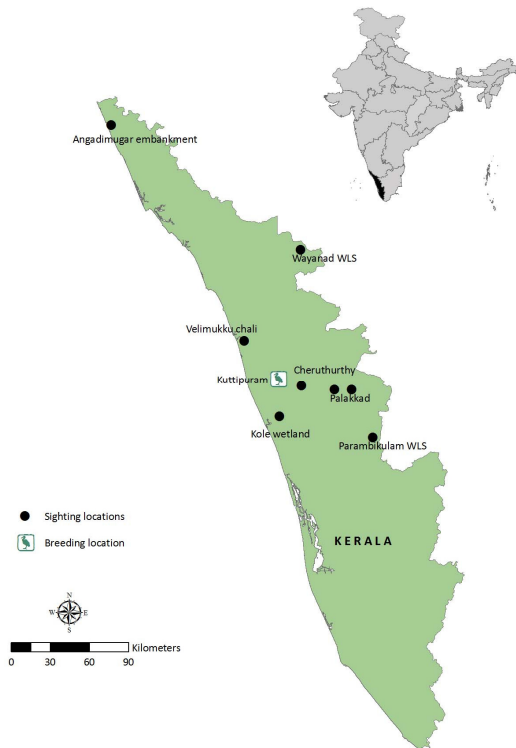


Figure 1. Distribution and breeding location of the Black-bellied Tern in Kerala.

Black-bellied Terns were observed at two other localities: on 11 October 2008 at Angadimugar embankment in Kasaragode District, and on 12 December 2008 at Velimukku Chali. The last two observations were unexpected because the authors were not aware of the occurrence of the species in these locations. On all three occasions, the terns were actively involved in feeding. The Black-bellied Tern requires large sand spits and mudflats for nesting and resting (Ali & Ripley 1983). One active nest with chicks was reported from a sand spit at

Kuttippuram Mallurkadavu, Kerala (Sushanthkumar 2004). Such sand spits are under great pressure from sand mining activities. Restoring the sand spits and keeping the sand mining activities under control would certainly help to protect the important breeding grounds of the species.

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